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Summary

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Scholars have attributed strong persuasive effects to the figurative words of politicians and other political actors. For example, it has been argued that Donald Trump won the presidential elections because of his metaphorical and hyperbolic language use, and that metaphorical frames motivated the British to vote in favor of Brexit. This suggests that figurative frames work as some kind of magic wands, with which political actors can wave to steer people's minds in line with their ideology. However, in reality, not all Americans voted for Trump (in fact, Hilary Clinton won the popular vote) and in Britain, the 'leave' campaign won by only 51.9 % of the vote. This raises the question whether the persuasive impact of figurative frames in political discourse is as strong and unconditional as is oftentimes suggested and leads to the main research question of this dissertation: How do figurative frames in political discourse affect political opinion?

In this dissertation I present a series of studies that together aim to further understand how figurative frames in political discourse can affect political opinion, and hence, society. The idea that figurative language can affect recipients has been acknowledged since antiquity. Ideas about how figurative language can impact people, however, have changed over the years. Since the 1980s, it has been widely acknowledged that figurative language not only adds rhetorical flourish to a speech or text, but that it can transfer conceptual content as well. In doing so, figurative language can fulfill one or more of the functions of framing that were defined by Entman (1993): it can foreground a particular problem definition, give a causal interpretation, address a problem evaluation and/or promote a possible problem solution.

Consider for example the figurative frame 'a tsunami of Islamization', which is a hyperbolic extension of the commonly used metaphor of 'immigration wave'. This frame was used by Dutch right-wing populist

Geert Wilders to address the issue of Islamic immigration into the Netherlands. The frame portrays Islamic immigration as a highly dangerous phenomenon (problem definition), that can cause serious trouble (causal interpretation), is difficult to control (problem evaluation) and, to stop it from harming the country, requires immediate action (possible solution). A figurative frame can thus affect how people reason on the issue that is framed, and hence steer people's opinion more in line with the advocated stance.

Different theoretical models have been used to explain how figurative frames affect political opinion. Many scholars who study the persuasive impact of figurative frames in political discourse (implicitly) assume that figurative language affects recipients in a strong and direct way. However, several other scholars who study the effects of figurative frames, argue that persuasion through figurative framing is more complex than is oftentimes assumed, and that figurative frames affect recipients in subtle and indirect ways. Many communication-scientific theories support this hypothesis and posit that, in general, effects of communicated messages are conditional upon several factors, varying from recipient characteristics to recipient perceptions. Thus, two models that explain how figurative frames can affect political opinion can be deduced from literature: (1) a direct-effects model of figurative framing and (2) an indirect-effects model of figurative framing. In this dissertation, I empirically compare these two models in order to answer the question which model best explains how figurative frames in political discourse affect political opinion.

This dissertation consists of four research chapters. The first research chapter (*Chapter 2*) comprises a systematic literature review on the persuasive impact of figurative frames in political discourse. The other research chapters (*Chapters 3, 4, and 5*) encompass a series of experimental studies that compare and contrast variations on the two models of figurative-framing effects.

To create an overview of the current state of research on figurative-framing effects, the systematic review described in Chapter 2 compared the persuasive effects of figurative frames in political discourse as were reported by scholars that took one of two distinct research approaches: a critical-discourse approach (CDA) versus a response-elicitation approach (REA). Results show that effects CDA and REA studies report diverging effects. In all CDA studies direct effects were attributed to figurative frames, whereas 33.4% of the REA studies did not report any direct effect. Moreover, effects reported in CDA studies were typically more impactful than effects reported in REA studies. These findings show that not all figurative frames influence political opinion in a strong and direct way, which suggests that we might need a more complex model to explain how figurative frames affect political opinion (or not).

The systematic review has also put forward several key issues that are important to address when testing for figurative-framing effects: (1) characteristics of figurative frames, (2) characteristics of recipients, and (3) underlying mechanisms of figurative-framing effects. In *Chapters 3, 4, and 5*, I present a total of four experimental studies in which I tested and compared different variants on the two proposed models of figurative-framing effects. In each study, I tested a variant on the direct-effects model of figurative framing, and a variant on the indirect-effects model of figurative framing. These variants were based on the three key issues mentioned above.

Chapter 3 experimentally tested the hypothesis that different types of metaphorical frames, namely novel and conventional metaphorical frames, affect issue viewpoint through two different underlying mechanisms: cognitive and affective text perception. No direct effects of metaphors on issue opinion were found, and no indirect effects, via cognitive or affective text perception, were found either. Rather, I discovered indirect effects of metaphor on both cognitive and affective text perception via two different perceptions of metaphor: perceived novelty and aptness. Novel metaphors

were perceived as more novel than conventional metaphors and conventional metaphors were perceived as more novel than non-metaphorical frames. Via perceived novelty, both metaphors positively affected cognitive and affective text perception. For cognitive text perception, however, positive indirect effects were suppressed by negative indirect effects via perceived aptness of the metaphorical frames. Thus, although this study showed no direct or indirect effects of metaphorical frames on issue viewpoint, it did show that metaphors can have subtle effects on different dimensions of text perception through different mechanisms, evoked by two different types of metaphor perception: perceived novelty and perceived aptness.

Considering frame characteristics, the systematic literature review showed that several frames that were studied by CDA scholars as being metaphorical, in fact comprise both metaphor and hyperbole. It is hypothesized that the persuasive impact of such combinatory figurative frames can reach beyond the impact of frames that are solely metaphorical or hyperbolic, because these frames combine the persuasive power of two types of figuration. While combinatory figurative frames seem common in political rhetoric, their effects had not been tested in an experimental setting yet.

The hypothesis that combinatory figurative frames are more persuasive than frames comprising solely metaphor or hyperbole is first tested with two experiments that investigated the persuasive impact of figuratively framed right-wing populist anti-immigration statements on political opinion. These two experiments, presented in *Chapter 4*, also hypothesized that perceived message intensity and emotions mediate the persuasive impact of figurative frames, and that political affiliation influences figurative-framing effects. Results showed that hyperbole (experiment 1) and metaphor (experiment 2) directly affected political persuasion. However, contrary to what is assumed by a direct-effects model of figurative framing, these direct effects were boomerang effects: the political

opinion of the general voter was pushed further away from the politician and their political ideas. Indirect boomerang effects were also discovered: figurative frames that evoked negative emotions, were perceived as intense and/or not apt (control variable) made voters more negative about the politician and their proposed policy. Recipient' self-indicated political position on a left-right scale did not moderate figurative-framing effects. However, recipients who indicated to support a right-wing populist party responded differently to the figuratively framed statements than other voters: their political opinion was not affected by the anti-immigration metaphors and hyperboles. These findings suggest that, with their figurative frames, right-wing populist politicians can broaden the gap between right-wing populist voters and other voters, hereby putting in motion further polarization of our society.

To further examine how right-wing populist voters respond to figuratively framed anti-immigration rhetoric, I conducted an experiment among a unique sample of Dutch right-wing populist voters. This experiment, presented in *Chapter 5*, expected combinatory figurative frames to be more persuasive than frames that only comprise metaphor or hyperbole, and also expected figurative-framing effects to be mediated by perceived message intensity and evoked emotions. Moreover, it tested the hypothesis that voters who weakly identify with a right-wing populist party are more responsive to figuratively framed anti-immigration frames than voters who strongly identify with a right-wing populist party. Results did not show any direct effects of figurative frames on political opinion. However, metaphors and hyperboles had a negative indirect effect on political opinion, via perceived extremity, novelty and, aptness (control variables). Thus, against expectations, boomerang effects of figuratively framed right-wing populist statements were also discovered among supportive voters. These indirect boomerang effects mainly held for voters who weakly identified with their favorite right-wing populist party. With this experiment, I showed that right-wing populist voters respond

differently to figuratively framed right-wing populist rhetoric than is generally assumed; even supportive voters can be pushed away by the extreme language use of their political leaders. However, results also showed that right-wing populist voters were highly enthusiastic about the promise of stronger immigration measures, regardless of the way this promise was framed. It seems that, for right-wing populist voters, being heard and acknowledged in their grievances, rather than being told what to grieve about, drives their political support.

The results of the empirical studies univocally support an indirect-effects model of figurative framing over a direct-effects model of figurative framing. The experimental studies provided no support for the hypothesis that figurative frames can persuade recipients to adopt an advocated stance in a direct, unconditional way. Rather, results from these studies showed that figurative-framing effects can be influenced by different factors, such as different recipient characteristics and recipient perceptions, which together determine whether persuasive effects occur (or not).

In view of the findings of this dissertation, I propose a new model of figurative-framing effects: the impact of figurative frames model (IFF model). The IFF model is an updated version of the indirect-effects model of figurative framing. Variables and their causal relations are further specified in light of the findings of the findings of this dissertation. Moreover, based on a discussion of the caveats of this dissertation, several variables that are important to address in future research are included in the model. The IFF model takes into account that characteristics of figurative frames can vary on different level levels (i.e., the level of linguistic form, conceptual structure and communicative function), that different recipient characteristics (i.e., political affiliation, party-identification strength, political knowledge, attitude dimension) can moderate figurative-framing effects, and that different recipient perceptions (i.e., emotions, different dimensions of text perception, perceived novelty, perceived aptness) can mediate figurative-framing

effects. Moreover, the IFF model takes into account that recipient characteristics can also strengthen or weaken indirect effects of figurative frames, and that context can influence figurative-framing effects. The IFF model hence serves as a first step towards a thorough understanding of how figurative frames in political discourse affect political opinion.

This dissertation contributes to the understanding of how figurative frames in political discourse affect political opinion. My findings have shown that a figurative frame is no magic wand with which a politicians or other public actor can wave to steer people's minds. Figurative-framing effects work in a complex, often indirect way, and can be influenced by different recipient characteristics and recipient perceptions. Moreover, figurative frames can backfire on their sender and can result in a decrease of political support. It seems that, rather than being easy targets, recipients are resilient, and will show reactance upon ideas they do not support. This does not mean that the figurative words of politicians are without any harm. By pushing away people with opposing political ideas, figurative frames might broaden the gap between supportive and opposing voters. Eventually, this might shut down the political and societal dialogue about immigration and other political issues, leading to further polarized nations.